

**North Merced Prescribed Burn (55562)
Public Scoping Document
March 14, 2019**

Stanislaus National Forest
Groveland District
Tuolumne and Mariposa Counties, CA

BACKGROUND

This scoping document provides information on a project being proposed by the Groveland Ranger District of the Stanislaus National Forest. The North Merced Prescribed Burn project would allow prescribed burning on up to 12,000 acres to reduce fuels, reduce the probability of future high intensity fire, and increase the resiliency of wildlife habitat. The proposed project is largely within the footprint of the 2018 Ferguson Fire, providing a good opportunity to maintain fuel loads and utilize existing containment lines.

The North Merced Prescribed Burn project is located in Mariposa and Tuolumne Counties on the Stanislaus National Forest, Groveland Ranger District. The legal description is: T2S R18E Sec. 13, 24, 25; T2S R19E Sec. 15-22, 25-36; T2S R20E Sec. 30; and T3S R19E Sec. 2-6. The project is adjacent to Yosemite National Park and private land.

The existing condition in the project area is a mixture of burned and unburned conifer forest, oak woodland, chaparral, riparian areas, and meadows. Many of the meadows in the project area contain dense patches of yellow star thistle, a non-native and invasive plant. The Ferguson Fire consumed fuels in some areas, but fuel levels remain high in much of the project area. The desired condition is a landscape that is ecologically healthy and resilient to high intensity fire, and includes mature forest connectivity between Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park. The intent of the project is to move the landscape towards the desired condition.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The North Merced Prescribed Burn project area has an extensive fire history, including the 2018 Ferguson Fire. Based on this history, the predicted increase in high intensity fire in the central Sierra Nevada, and current fuel loading, the area is susceptible to burning at high intensity in the future. Largescale high intensity fire would put multiple values at risk, including wildlife habitat, timber stands, and the Merced Grove of giant sequoia trees in adjacent Yosemite National Park.

The purpose of the North Merced Prescribed Burn project is to:

1. Reduce the probability of largescale high intensity fire and increase the resilience of forested wildlife habitat and plantations (that will serve as future mature forest habitat).
2. Improve the quality of deer forage and movement corridors.

In order to meet these objectives, the interdisciplinary (ID) team identified the following needs:

1. Use prescribed fire to reduce elevated fuel loads within and adjacent to forest habitat.

2. Use prescribed fire to reduce standing yellow star thistle biomass and open corridors through dense brush for deer movement.

PROPOSED ACTION

To achieve the desired conditions identified above, the Stanislaus National Forest is proposing to implement prescribed burns on up to 12,000 acres. Burning will not take place on every acre at once, some acres will remain unburned, and some acres will be burned with multiple entries. Burn strategy will be site specific based on fuel conditions and maximizing benefits to wildlife habitat.

Prescribed fire preparation may include falling trees for firefighter safety or burn strategy, piling hazardous fuels, and maintaining or constructing control lines. Utility Task Vehicles (UTV's), chainsaws, and hand tools may be used to support site preparation and prescribed burning activities. Hand tools or heavy equipment (dozers or excavators) may be used to maintain or construct control lines. Proposed lines and proposed burn units are shown in Appendix A. Some of the lines shown are existing and some were rehabilitated after the Ferguson Fire. Additional lines may be necessary to facilitate safe burning and to protect resources. Any additional lines will be reviewed by the ID team and approved by the deciding official prior to implementation. Prescribed burns will be ignited by aircraft or using hand tools and will comply with all applicable Air Pollution Control District and Title 17 Smoke Management Program provisions.

Burning may take place within wildlife Protected Activity Centers (PACs) in order to increase resiliency to future high intensity fire. There are three great gray owl PACs, three spotted owl PACs, and one northern goshawk PAC within the project area (Appendix B). Fire preparation and burning in PACs would comply with the Forest Plan (USDA 2017). Specifically, Standard and Guideline 74 which states, "In PACs located outside the Wildland Urban Interface, limit stand-altering activities to reducing surface and ladder fuels through prescribed fire treatments. In forested stands with overstory trees 11 inches dbh and greater, design prescribed fire treatments to have an average flame length of 4 feet or less. Hand treatments, including handline construction, tree pruning, and cutting of small trees (less than 6 inches dbh), may be conducted prior to burning as needed to protect important elements of (spotted) owl habitat." Trees six inches dbh or larger could only be felled in PACs if they pose a substantial safety concern during implementation. This circumstance is expected to be rare.

SCOPING PROCESS

Public participation is important during project planning and analysis. The Forest Service seeks to develop this project through a collaborative process that includes multiple interested parties or persons representing diverse interests. The scoping intent is to share our initial proposal and seek information, comments, and assistance from federal, state, and local agencies and individuals or organizations that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. To accomplish this intent, we request your input and comments be submitted prior to April 15, 2019. Although you are encouraged to submit comments at any point during the planning process, input received prior to this date will be most useful in order for us to consider your comments and suggestions during project planning and analysis.

HOW TO COMMENT

To assist in the development of this project, please provide comments via mail or e-mail. Input can be mailed to: Stanislaus National Forest, Supervisor's Office, Attn: Ryan Kalinowski, 19777 Greenley Road, Sonora, CA 95370. If submitting comments electronically, please submit in common formats (.doc, .pdf, .txt, .rtf) to ryan.kalinowski@usda.gov. Please use '**North Merced Prescribed Burn**' in the subject line. Names and addresses of those who comment will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action, and will be available for public inspection. Please submit comments prior to April 15, 2019. The interdisciplinary team will review all comments received.

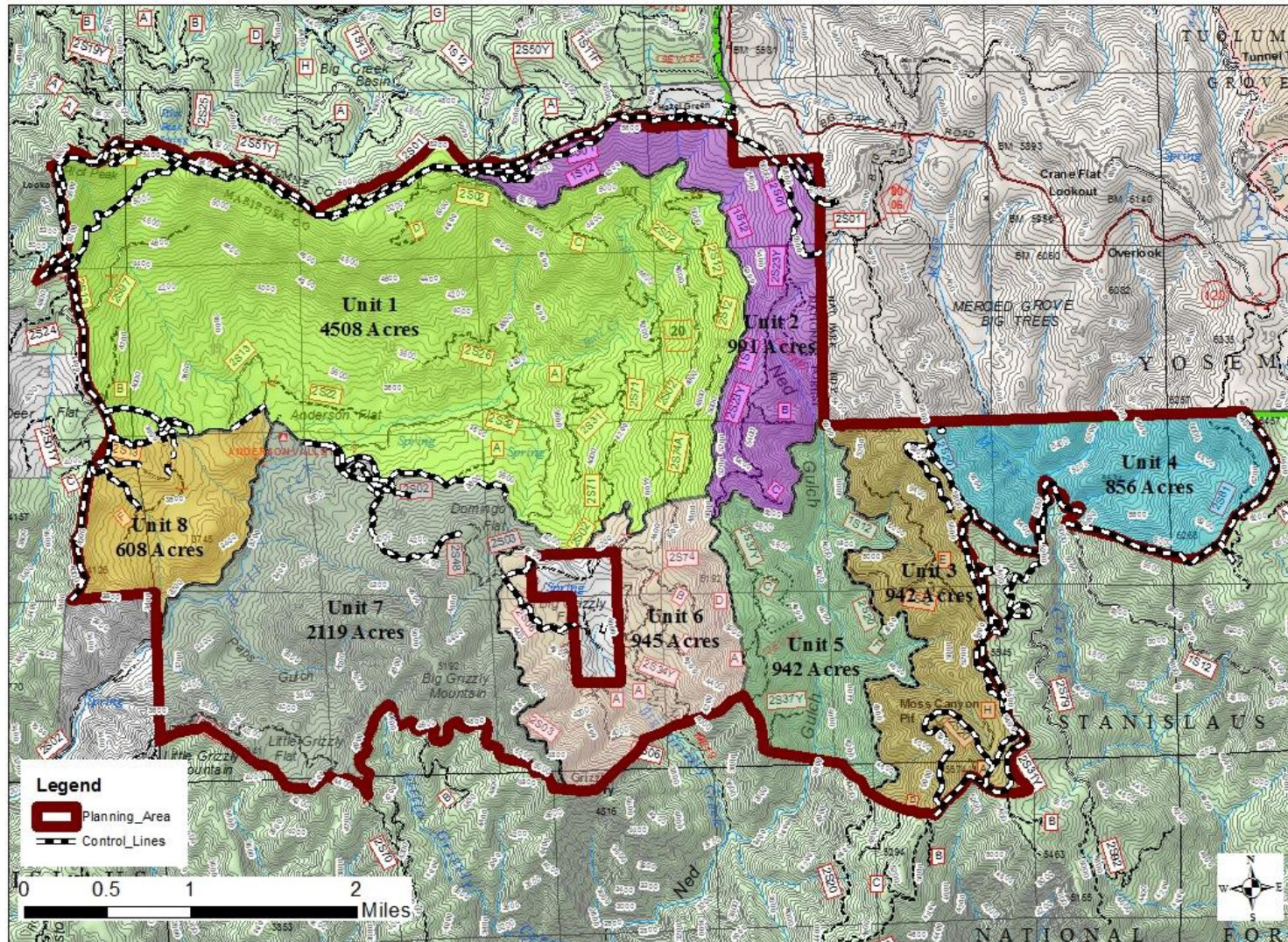
INFORMATION CONTACT

For additional information regarding this project, contact Ryan Kalinowski at the Stanislaus National Forest, Supervisor's Office, 19777 Greenley Road, Sonora, CA 95370; or, call (209) 288-6323; or email ryan.kalinowski@usda.gov. Documents related to this project will be posted online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=55562>

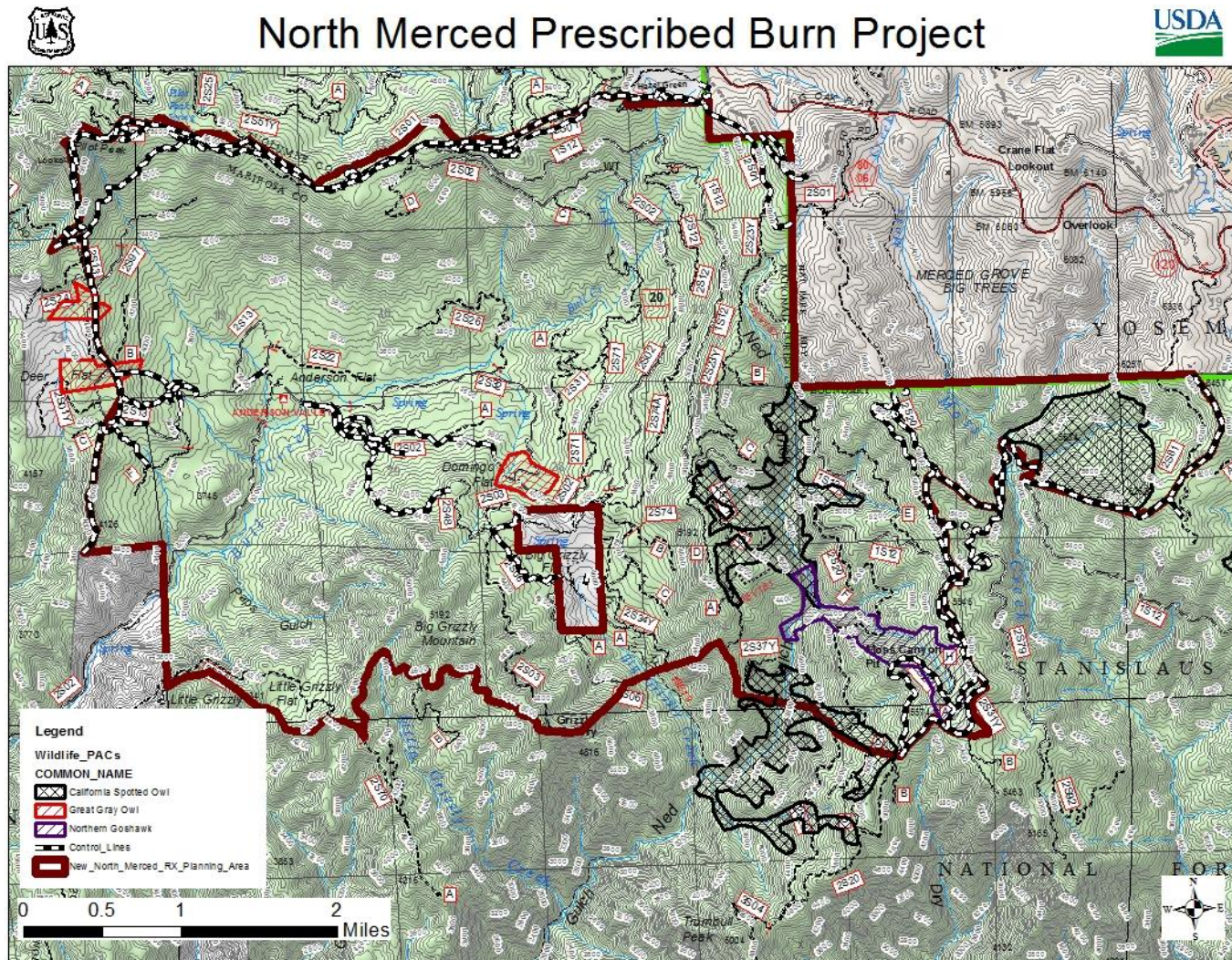
APPENDIX A: PROJECT MAP



North Merced Prescribed Burn Project



APPENDIX B: WILDLIFE PROTECTED ACTIVITY CENTERS



APPENDIX C: References

USDA 2017. Stanislaus National Forest, Forest Plan Direction. March 2017. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, Stanislaus National Forest, Sonora, CA.